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ABSTRACT

A study examined the transition from dependent writing (dictation) to independent writing for 40 first grade students. Specifically, the study investigated (1) how, in terms of common quantitative language units (mean words per t-unit, mean number of dependent clauses, words per maze, mean number of dependent clauses per t-unit, and length in words), the modes of dictation, independent writing, and retelling compare; and (2) how the aural comprehension elements (knowledge of character, events, and plot) in students' retelling transcripts may be described and compared both with each other and with the t-unit analysis. After the data were collected and the oral retellings transcribed, the dictations were analyzed for t-units, dependent clauses, mazes, and number of words. The retellings were assessed using the Reading Miscue Inventory Retelling Guide to indicate how well the student retold character, event, and plot information. Findings revealed little difference among the three modes of expression. The only differences observed were that retelling produced more mazes and that fewer words were produced in independent writing than in retelling or dictation. Dependent clauses were used very infrequently, with the fewest number used in independent writing and the most in oral retelling. The data on aural comprehension revealed that the retelling of events was the single best predictor of composition quality. (HOD)

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A COMPARISON OF FIRST-GRADER'S ABILITY IN THREE MODES OF EXPRESSION: DICTATION, INDEPENDENT WRITING, AND STORY RETELLING

Dr. Victor Froese

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A COMPARISON OF FIRST-GRADER'S ABILITY IN THREE MODES OF EXPRESSION: DICTATION, INDEPENDENT WRITING, AND STORY RETELLING*.

Dr. Victor Froese

National Reading Conference, Austin, November 30, 1983

The transition from dependent writing (dictation) to independent writing is a crucial one for first-graders and their teachers who must understand this metamorphosis and be able to assist in the optimal development of the child's language potential. This study explored a variety of language variables in three modes of expression (dictation, independent writing, and story retelling) during the transition phase. In addition, the relationship between unaided aural story comprehension and unaided story retelling was examined.

BACKGROUND & NEED FOR STUDY

The initial interest in this study stemmed from the author's preference for an experienced-based approach to teaching language (Braun & Froese, 1977) and a proposed developmental progression in understanding how children learn to write (Froese, 1978).

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Perhaps one of the most startling reminders of the close linkage between writing and speaking was Loban's (1976) observation that "subjects tend to speak and write in units of virtually the same average length." Unfortunately, Loban did not gather writing samples below grade four. The paucity of research in writing at the primary grade level was also noted by King & Rentel (1979) at this time. By then Barrit & Kroll (1978) were calling for "cognitive-developmental" research in composing and Graves (1975) was well into his process-oriented type of investigations. As late as 1981, Stotsky (NCTE,Boston) lamented that the studies on the relationship between reading and writing were basically of only three types: correlational, studies examining the influence of writing on reading, and vice-versa.

In Britain, the relationship between talking and writing was explored by Briton, et al (1967) and in the U.S.A. James Moffett expounded similar views.

Most recently, Moffett (1983) explained the relationship among thinking, writing, and reading in this manner: "Reading assimilates one person's composed inner speech into another person's on-going inner stream so that one's composition temporarily restructures the other's consciousness. Writing temporarily restructures one's own consciousness as one focuses, edits, and revises the inner stream so as to act on another's."

The above mentioned interrelationships naturally lead to other questions such as those raised by Morris (1981):"Should writing be viewed as a secondary language process; Should reading and writing be thought of as complementary; Should writing be viewed as a beneficial introduction to learning to read; Does there exist in the minds of beginning readers a developing conceptual knowledge of wordness that underlies their ability both to read and spell words?"

Combined, these theorizations, speculations, and observations seemed to suggest that while an interrelationship was commonly assumed, very little systematic and descriptive data existed to relate all four language processed--speaking, writing, reading, and listening--especially in the primary grades. With this in mind, the present study was devised to provide information about children's ability to dictate , to write independently, to retell a story they had heard, and to comprehend (in an unaided manner) a story read to them.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The intent of this study was to examine the relationship among the four language modes during Stage 2: Dictation as proposed by the author (Stage 1 is the

Readiness level; Stage 3 the Independent level--after Froese, 1978). The student at Stage 2 of development is becoming facile with oral language but still has many obstacles to overcome in recording ideas on paper. While the child may have the fine motor skills to make the letter forms, the process of keeping ideas in the "mind's eye" while attempting to write them is tedious and requires great concentration. In addition, the student at this stage has some difficulty forming some letter and the concept of "sentence"--writing in manageable units separated by punctuation--is a rather vague notion.

Based on this perspective the present study asked the following questions:

1. In terms of common quantitative language units (mean words per t-unit, mean number of dependent clauses, words per maze, mean number of dependent clauses per t-unit, and length in words) how do the three modes--dictation, independent writing, and retelling compare?
2. How may the aural comprehension elements (knowledge of character, events, plot) in student's retelling transcripts be described and compared both with each other and with the t-unit analysis?

METHODS & PROCEDURES

Initially 40 first-grade subjects, 10 from each of four elementary schools were drawn from one suburban

Winnipeg school division on the basis of their beginning writing abilities (i.e. they could write 2 or 3 statements independently), but for the statistical analysis only the 19 complete protocols were used.

Arrangements were made for two graduate students to record the dictations (original to student, carbon copy for study), to read a story to students, and to hear the stories retold (these were tape-recorded for transcription purposes). The stories used were specially written to a common story structure and were read by one examiner and retold to another examiner in an adjacent room. While the general procedure for collecting the independent writing samples were discussed with classroom teachers, the specific motivation (i.e. pictures, experiences, etc.) and production was left under their care. One writing sample was to be collected every other week during the period February 1st to March 26th. Dictations were taken on alternate weeks between January 25 and March 12th. The story reading and retelling was used as the "ice breaker" at the beginning of the study to allow the graduate students to meet with the subjects individually and the same procedure was repeated at the end of the study. Examiners were asked to keep anecdotal notes with regards to individual subject's reactions to the situation throughout the experimental period. In general the

procedures for collecting the language samples were patterned after those employed by Loban (1976) and King & Rentel (1981). The complete protocols contained four dictation samples, three independent writing samples, and two retelling samples.

After the data were collected, the oral retellings were transcribed, the dictations were analyzed for T-units, dependent clauses, mazes, and number of words. The retellings were also assessed using the RMI Retelling Guide (Burke & Goodman, 1972) to indicate how well the student retold character(recall and development), event, and plot information. This was taken as the measure of unaided aural comprehension.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In order to compare the first three modes of language expression--dictation, independent writing, and retelling--factorial analysis of variance with repeated measures (BMD02V)were used and trials were collapsed within modes. Only two instances of statistically significant mode effects were noted: For words/maze, $F=15.39$, $df=2,10$, $p=.0009$ and for words/story, $F=5.03$, $df=2,10$, $p=.0308$. Since the purpose of the study was to provide descriptive information, the means for the various language measures are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

DICTATION, INDEPENDENT WRITING, & RETELLING COMPARISONS

(MEANS)

	Dictation	Ind. Writing	Retelling
Words/T-unit	7.846	6.409	7.250
Mean Dep.Clauses	1.145	.281	1.474
Words/maze	.280	.375	12.310
Mean DC/T-unit	.100	.070	.084
Total Words	80.110	22.030	105.600

The second question dealt with the descriptive aspects of aural comprehension and the interrelationship of the units assessed. Correlational analysis were used for this portion of the study. Table 2 shows the breakdown for Retelling 1 (completed before the other data were collected) and Retelling 2 which terminated the study. The two analysis show essentially the same results--in terms of normal comprehension questions, the total percentages are low--36.3 percent for Retelling 1 and 19.3 percent for Retelling 2. Naturally these are indicators of unaided aural comprehension and should therefore not be directly equated with normally cued comprehension (i.e. via questions or choices).

TABLE 2

AURAL COMPREHENSION - BASED ON RETELLING

(IN PERCENTAGES)

	Retelling 1	Retelling 2
Character (Recall)	9.789	2.421
Character (Development)	2.526	4.211
Events	13.000	8.158
Plot	11.000	3.947
Total	36.316	19.263

Table 3 shows the correlational analysis. It becomes evident that "events" was the best predictor of TOTAL COMPREHENSION (r=.98 and .92) and that the identification of "plot" followed closely behind (r=.94 and .88). Since the traditional measures of language complexity such as T-units have been criticized (Crowhurst, 1983) as not necessarily being related to quality in compositions, an analysis was undertaken to compare the combined Retelling scores (measure of complexity) with the Total Comprehension (measure of comprehension quality). The resulting significant correlation of 0.62 ($df=17, p<.05$) indicated that when using these measures there was a moderate relationship between these quantitative and qualitative measures.

TABLE 3

INTERRELATIONSHIPS OF AURAL COMPREHENSION MEASURES

(CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS)

	Retelling 1	Retelling2
Character(recall) vs Total	.86	.44
Character(devel.) vs Total	.87	.65
Events vs Total	.98	.92
Plot vs Total	.94	.88
Events vs Plot	.89	.72
Charac(r)vs Charac(d)	.64	.30
T-units(comb.)vs Total	.62	

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

From the data presented one is lead to conclude that indeed their is little difference among the three modes of language under study--dictation, independent writing, and retelling--when common language units such as T-units, dependent clauses, mazes, dependent clauses per T-unit, and total words produced are compared. The only differences observed were that retelling produced more mazes (mostly accounted for by one school) and that the number of words produced in independent writing was the lowest (22 words - again mostly due to one school, but a different school from the one producing the mazes) when compared to dictation (80

words) and retelling (106 words). Dependent clauses were used very infrequently by these first-graders --approximately ONE per writing session; the fewest number of dependent clauses were used in independent writing, the most in oral retelling. These findings were in keeping with the previous findings of Loban (1976) who found approximately equal numbers of communication units in oral and written language in grades 4-12 and with Fox (1972) who found first-grader's oral language to be in the 7.0-7.2 range in terms of T-unit length. However, the number of words produced in oral retelling and independent writing seems low when compared to data presented by Graves & Giacobbe (1982). These authors report written accounts of 73 words long (compared to 22 in this study) and oral accounts of 246 words long (compared to 106) in December of grade one.

When examining the data on aural comprehension in this study it becomes clear that there is a reasonable correlation betweeen retelling as measured by traditional language measures and as measured by a "quality" measure (in this case RMI-like scoring of character, plot, and events mentioned). It also becomes clear that the retelling of EVENTS is the single best predictor of composition quality. This finding appears to agree with the findings of Hansche (1983) at the grade 1,4,8 and 10 level and with Phifer, et al (1983) who concluded that "the presence of details enhanced recall of major idea units" at

the adult level. While a step-wise regression analysis was not performed, it is clear from Table 3 that very little would be added to the prediction of TOTAL RETELLING by the addition of the variables: character recall, character development, and plot. These types of findings could be used to develop a weighted RMI-type scoring system to produce more valid predictions.

In conclusion, the present findings provide some descriptive evidence (though of the product type) of what teachers may expect of first-graders. As Graves (1982) has querried: "Will the teacher know growth when it is present, even though the child may be struggling with his or her piece?" Combining this normative with his ipsitive data may provide some of the answers.

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